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SUBJECT: GEORGIA BI-WEEKLY UPDATE OCTOBER 12

¶1. This cable contains current items of political, economic, and social interest concerning Georgia during the weeks of September 29-October 12.

Opposition Rally Planned for November 2

¶2. Several leading opposition parties which have rallied around the case of former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili and have called for early parliamentary elections in April 2008 are planning to punctuate their campaign with a mass protest rally in Tbilisi on November 2. This coincides with an international conference scheduled at the same time, co-hosted by the Georgian government and the German Marshall Fund, to address Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. According to ruling party representatives, a number of high-level guests, including presidents of several countries, are expected to attend. The opposition has claimed it had no knowledge of the conference when it scheduled the demonstration, but the Republican Party's Tina Khidasheli described the timing as a "gift" that would allow the foreign visitors to see what is "really happening in this country." In response, David Kirkitadze, MP and Secretary General of the ruling National Movement, suggested that

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the opposition chose the date on instructions from the Russian Embassy.

Saakashvili Announces Aid for Vulnerable Population

¶3. Speaking in a televised meeting with cabinet ministers on October 4, President Saakashvili said "life is getting expensive" for Georgian citizens and it was essential that compensation for the vulnerable part of society should accompany Georgia's economic growth. (Note: Overall inflation was about 9.7 percent in September.) To achieve his aims, Saakashvili pledged at least GEL 100 million (USD 60 million) in one-time allowances for teachers and pensioners, as well as for a state-funded employment program. The one-time "compensation packages" would be designated for electricity and gas payments, or for electricity and wheat in rural areas, which in some cases have no gas supply.

Georgian Radio Launched into Abkhazia

¶4. On October 5, the Georgian-backed Abkhaz Government-in-Exile launched a new radio station, Voice of Abkhazia. Located in Zugdidi, in western Georgia, the station can reportedly cover the entire territory of Abkhazia. Round-the-clock broadcasting will be mostly conducted in Russian, though part of the news and information will be also broadcast in Abkhaz. The opening of the station was celebrated with a large concert of popular singers. President Saakashvili delivered a strongly worded speech, declaring that a "countdown" has begun for Georgia to reclaim Abkhazia. For its part, the de facto government of Abkhazia called the new station "an ideological instrument of the fascist regime of Tbilisi," and declared it would jam its frequency. According to Georgian press reports, some residents of Abkhazia's ethnically Georgian Gali district were prevented from attending the concert by Abkhaz police, who allegedly detained and physically abused them.

Cyber Security Cooperation with Estonia

15. The Permanent Secretary General of Estonia's Ministry of Defense gave a lecture September 21 at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies stressing the importance of international cooperation against cyber-attack, especially the type of coordinated and politically motivated attack recently suffered by Estonia. As the Estonian DCM told INL Program Officer, an Estonian technical team plans to travel to Georgia to assess the country's IT infrastructure; the travel dates may be linked to an impending visit by the Estonian Minister of Defense within the next 3 months. The Estonian DCM seemed eager to cooperate and promised to provide additional information about the Minister's visit and the team's plans.

Mixed Signals on French NATO Views

16. Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze spoke out quickly in response to public comments by French Defense Minister Herve Morin that his country would support Georgia's NATO membership only if it would not be seen as a threat "with regards to Russia." Burjanadze said the remarks sent "a very wrong message to Russia," essentially telling Russia that "you will succeed, if you continue to behave badly." President Saakashvili commented on the same issue on October 4 during the visit of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, saying France is "extremely supportive" of Georgia's drive to join NATO. Saakashvili said he based his judgments on two meetings with his French counterpart, Nicolas Sarkozy, in recent months - one during Saakashvili's official visit to Paris in June and another in Marseille on September 30 when two leaders attended the World Cup rugby match between Georgia and France.

Georgian Soldier Commits Suicide in Iraq

17. The Ministry of Defense has announced that Corporal Zurab Chighoshvili, who was serving in Wasit Province, Iraq, committed suicide September 30. Officials said there was no connection

TBILISI 00002579 002 OF 002

between the corporal's military service and his suicide, which was the result of personal difficulties.

Steps Forward in Kutaisi

18. During an October 5-6 visit to Kutaisi, Georgia's second-largest city, the Ambassador took part in the ribbon-cutting for a new cheese factory, constructed with assistance from USAID's Agvantage program, that should be able to support up to 400 local dairy farmers. Regional Governor Akaki Bobokhidze told the Ambassador that Kutaisi's infrastructure has been nearly rehabilitated, except for the water system. Local officials are currently looking for donors to assist with the projected USD 18 million project. It currently takes 5-6 liters of water at the source to provide a single liter of water in town, because of leaky pipes. Kutaisi has been the center of a series of corruption cases among city officials. Bobokhidze said corruption among local officials remains a problem, as he cannot pay a salary high enough to dissuade someone from "making \$5,000 with the stroke of a pen." The Ambassador also visited a local youth center directed by a Peace Corps Volunteer, and took part in Kutaisi's October 6 Breast Health Awareness Walk to raise awareness about breast cancer screening and treatment.

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